

SEABIRDS IN BELGIAN MARINE WATERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

Stienen Eric W.M.¹, Jeroen Van Waeyenberge¹, Jan Seys^{1,2}, Henk Offringa³, Patrick Meire⁴ and Eckhart Kuijken¹

¹ Institute of Nature Conservation, Kliniekstraat 25, B-1070 Brussels, Belgium
E-mail: eric.stienen@instnat.be

² Flanders Marine Institute, Victoriaalaan 3, B-8400 Ostend, Belgium

³ Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, North Sea Directorate, P.O. Box 5807, NL-2280 HV Rijswijk, The Netherlands

⁴ University of Antwerp, Department of Biology, Universiteitsplein 1, B-2610 Antwerp (Wilrijk), Belgium

In 1992, the Institute of Nature Conservation (INC) started ship-based surveys on the Belgian Continental Shelf (BCS) to study the spatial and temporal distribution of seabirds. Among other things, the study showed that the Belgian marine waters hold internationally important numbers (> 1% of the biogeographical populations) of several coastal and marine bird species. Also the area proved to be of major importance for several species of migratory birds. Out of the 121 bird species encountered at sea during the period 1992-98, 23 were selected as being true marine species that occur in relatively high densities within the Belgian waters. Of these 23 species six were so-called 'focal species', being seabirds which are included in the highest priority lists of international conservation instruments (EC-Birds Directive, Bern Convention or Bonn Convention) and which attain at least 1% of the flyway population in Belgian marine waters in a particular season. Based on the distribution patterns, conservation value, and sensitivity for disturbance or oil pollution of the six focal seabirds several areas of high ornithological importance as well as areas sensitive for disturbance or pollution could be distinguished at the BCS. The avian hotspots at the Westkustbanken and Vlaamse Banken turned out to be the most sensitive areas for disturbance and oil pollution throughout the year, while the sensitivity of other areas varies with the seasons.